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SUBJECT: WHOSE ISLAM? AK PARTI AND ISTANBUL ALEVIS

Classified By: CG David L. Arnett for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Alevis, followers of a heterodox religious-cultural offshoot of Shi'a Islam and Anatolian Sufism, probably number about 10 percent of Turkey's population (7 million, with several million in Istanbul), although some Alevis assert that there are 25 million. Persecuted by the Ottomans and historically secularist since the founding of the Turkish Republic, Alevis have historically voted left, especially for CHP. Though Alevi leaders distanced themselves from CHP in the November 2002 elections, no affinity for AK Parti has taken its place. Recent comments by PM Erdogan have been seen by Istanbul Alevis as confirming their suspicions of AK's lack of sympathy for their beliefs. END SUMMARY.

The Alevi place in Turkish politics

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¶12. (U) No reliable figures exist for the number of Alevis in Turkey. In a country of 70 million people, Alevi leaders frequently claim that 1/4 to 1/3 of the population are Alevi. We think a more accurate estimate is 10 percent of the population, or seven million. Alevi houses of worship, called Cem Evis, are scattered throughout Istanbul, filled with Alevis who previously lived in central Anatolia. Alevis from the same village often congregate at the same Cem Evi and live in the same neighborhood.

¶13. (U) Alevis were periodically and viciously persecuted by the authorities for their "heretical" religious views during the Ottoman imperial era. When Ataturk emerged as a political force in Central Anatolia in the early 1920s, Alevis were some of his earliest and fiercest supporters because they saw him as willing to suppress the Sunni majority. Support for CHP, the party founded by Ataturk, continued to be strong until the November 2002 parliamentary elections. Several Alevi leaders, among them Prof. Izzettin Dogan (President of the Cem Foundation), said publicly that CHP had done very little for Alevis over the years, and that Alevis should feel no special need to vote for them. According to Prof. Dogan, most Alevis elected not to vote rather than shift their support to another party.

¶14. (U) Although a Kemalist form of secularism has been ensconced in all republican constitutions as a founding principal of the Turkish state, the government controls and funds Sunni Islam through the Diyanet. Christians and Jews are guaranteed some protection for their religious practices and facilities, but Alevis and their places of worship are not.

Religion, culture, or both?

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¶15. (C) On September 4, during a trip to Germany, PM Erdogan discussed the status of Cem Evis in Turkey, saying: "...you cannot compare Cem Evis to mosques. One is a place of worship, whereas the other is only a house of culture. We cannot provide the help for Cem Evis that we do for mosques." In a September 12 conversation with Poloff, AK Parti Istanbul Vice Chairman Murat Yalcintas (son of AK heavyweight and MP Nevzat Yalcintas) confirmed AK's position that Alevi houses of worship do not rate protection and funding similar to mosques. Yalcintas said that the Prime Minister's comments were widely supported within AK Parti ranks. Yalcintas was critical of Alevi and Shi'a beliefs, saying "these people claim to be the followers of Ali and the family of the Prophet. If they honor Ali, they should pray like Ali did, and go to a mosque." In his view, a Cem Evi could only claim status as a religious house of worship if Alevis disavowed being Muslims.

¶17. (C) In a September 5 meeting with Poloff, board members of

the Haci Bektas-i Foundation (one of the two largest Alevi organizations in Turkey, representing the committed left wing of Alevidom) said they viewed PM Erdogan's comments as being "both a true reflection of his beliefs and, unfortunately, a legally correct statement," in that there is no legal status or funding for Cem Evis in existing Turkish law. The board members pointed out that they often have difficulty in obtaining permission for building facilities, and get no government funding from the Diyanet. Moreover, they complained, Diyanet funds are applied to building mosques, including in wholly-Alevi villages. Alevi tax dollars are thus being used to convert Alevis to Sunni Islam.

18. (C) Muharrem Eren, President of the Karacaahmet Sultan organization (a local, well-established, independent Alevi organization based in the conservative Uskudar neighborhood that claims over 5000 active members) told poloff that he and his followers do not expect the AK government to address their concerns. Eren claimed that when PM Erdogan was Istanbul Mayor he had tried to "destroy" their organization, at one point actually sending a demolition team in an effort to dismantle their Cem Evi in the middle of the night. Eren emphasized the widely-held Alevi view that the preservation of their religion and culture depends on strict enforcement of Ataturk's secular principles and that his political sympathies continue to lie with the CHP.

Disadvantaged Alevis?

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19. (C) Alevis have long charged that they are excluded from positions of leadership in Turkish society, and assert that high military, governmental, or judicial positions are not open to them. On the other hand, mainstream Sunni Muslim contacts claim that Alevis are disproportionately represented in high military, bureaucratic, and business circles; Islamist PM Erbakan played on this view when he had prominent members of his 1996-7 government warn against the "Syrianization" (i.e. secularization) of Turkey. Prof. Dogan told us, however, that he was troubled by recent complaints from members of his community that Alevis who are civil servants have been pressured to attend Sunni religious services. Reportedly, people he believes to be AK Parti functionaries have come to government ministries, asking office directors to regularly pray and attend services at a mosque. According to Dogan, in some few cases, Alevis have been pressured into resigning.

Comment

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10. (C) The views expressed by Dogan, Haci Bektas-i board members, and Karacaahmet Sultan do not reflect the full spectrum of the Istanbul Alevi community, but together they claim to represent the concerns and aspirations of more than a million Istanbul residents. The latest reaction over PM Erdogan's statement illustrates a considerable divide between AK and Turkey's Alevi community. Some AK supporters, while supportive of religious freedom in general (especially when it relates to Sunni Islamic religious expression), regard Alevis as heretics; others consider Alevis to be Sunnis at heart (they have common circumcision and burial rites), wayward Sunnis, or merely a cultural group. This latter view is given weight by the Alevi's use of alcohol, avoidance of fasting during Ramazan, and hanging of pictures of Ataturk alongside those of Ali in their Cem Evis. End comment.

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